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Indonesia: our distorted picture

Eleven myths about Indonesia, mostly relating to East Timor, have gained currency in Australia through inaccurate media presentation or deliberate prejudice, argues RICHARD WOOLCOTT.

THE WAY in which we manage our relations with Indonesia is at the core of our continuing policy thrust into the Asia-Pacific region. It is and will remain a test of our diplomatic maturity as a nation.

This relationship deserves serious, unemotional and objective analysis. Unfortunately, too much of the commentary about Indonesia in this country in recent years has been shallow, emotional and biased.

Indonesia-bashing certainly has appeared to be the favourite pastime of a vociferous lobby made up largely of pro-Fretilin East-Timorese refugees, frustrated left-wingers, hostile single-interest groups, and, I regret to say, latent racists, often masquerading behind the honourable banners of support for human rights and self-determination.

Regrettably, some members of the Australian media have made their own contributions.

Australia has an interest in dissociating itself from unbalanced and hostile criticism. This does not involve any compromise of our own values ... Seeking to introduce more balance in public attitudes to these countries and to place in perspective, prejudice and hostility towards them is not "grovelling" or "appeasement", to use some colourful words the media is prone to employ. It is simply sound commonsense.

The Indonesian Government is sometimes depicted, by individuals and groups hostile to Indonesia, as an aggressive and expansionist military dictatorship. In my assessment it is neither aggressive nor expansionist, notwithstanding its acquisition of West Irian, its "confrontation" of Malaysia and its annexation of East Timor; in each case there were special circumstances surrounding Indonesia's actions. There are no common threads to support the assertion that Indonesia is interested in territorial expansion.

There are 11 particular myths promoted by, at best, an inaccurate and sloppy presentation of events or, at worst, by deliberately prejudiced reporting and anti-Indonesian comment masquerading as news or moral rectitude. They are:

● Indonesia would have accepted an independent East Timor in 1975 and, in not persuading it to do so, Australia "fluffed" (*Herald*, December 3, 1991) the opportunity.

This overlooks the historical context and fails to recognise the depths of Indonesian concern at the way the situation was evolving or its resolve. It also overstates Australia's influence and overlooks the major powers' reluctance to act. The ASEAN countries, despite some reservations on the part of Singapore, considered that the integration of East Timor with Indonesia was important for longer-term regional security.

● Our response to Indonesia's invasion of East Timor should have been consistent with our later and very strong response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

In the case of Kuwait, a major multinational force was formed in conformity with United Nations Security Council resolutions to roll back Iraqi aggression. But East Timor was not a member of the UN; it was an abandoned colony, situated within the Indonesian archipelago, in a state of civil war. No thought was given in the UN to any military involvement.

● Indonesia is guilty of "genocide" in East Timor and has been responsible for the deaths of 200,000 people, or one third of the population of the province.

Nobody knows authoritatively how many people died in East Timor, during the civil war, as a result of tribal strife, during and after the Indonesian intervention, and as a result of famine. That people died is tragic but the deliberate exaggeration of numbers to discredit Indonesia is simply dishonest. Through a process not unlike "think of a number and double it" and what is called incestuous interquote — and with the active assistance of the pro-Fretilin lobby — what began as a figure of 60,000 dead or displaced has escalated to 200,000 or a third of the population.

● The central Government in Jakarta is bent on extinguishing Portuguese culture and replacing the Catholic religion with Islam in East Timor.

False. Indonesia is one of the most moderate and tolerant Islamic societies in the world. It has a number of Catholics in its Cabinet and the central Government and has been at pains to demonstrate religious toleration in East Timor.

● Indonesia has no concern for human rights.

Hardly fair. Many Indonesians — the Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, is a good example — have a serious concern for human rights. Indonesia is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But Indonesia is a very large, complex, developing society facing many problems ... there are understandably shades of opinion and many Indonesians put their perception of the national well-being ahead of the individual right of dissent.

● East Timor has been sealed off from the outside world to prevent outsiders becoming aware of the repression of the East Timorese people.

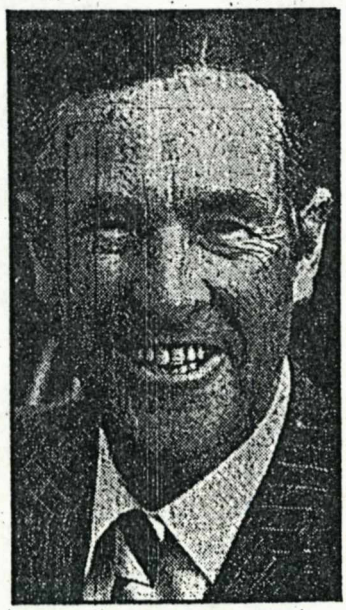
From time to time it has been closed. The fact remains that it has often been open to foreigners. Some 25 Australian journalists have visited it since 1975, as have MPs.

● The former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, "gave the green light" to Indonesia to invade East Timor in discussions with President Soeharto in 1974 and 1975.

This will be shown to be false when the archives are opened and all records are published. I was present: Whitlam made it clear that while he believed the best outcome of the decolonisation of East Timor would be to become a part of Indonesia, this outcome should be the result of an act of self-determination. He would not condone the use of force.

● Portugal is still the "administering authority" in East Timor.

Fatuous, except in the most arcane legalistic sense, since Portugal abandoned its neglected colony 17 years ago.



Mr Richard Woolcott ...: "too much commentary has been shallow, emotional and biased."

● Only Canada and Australia have recognised Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor (as stated most recently in an editorial in *The Canberra Times* on March 29).

False: more than 30 countries have explicitly or implicitly recognised East Timor as part of Indonesia.

● Australia is "out of step" with the rest of the world in its approach to Indonesia's role in East Timor (*The Bulletin*, November 1991).

We were out of step over the Dili massacre only insofar as we were in the vanguard of Indonesia's critics. Australia's official, and especially its media, reaction was far more firm and demanding than those of the other ASEAN countries, the US and Japan among others.

● Fretilin is the only authentic representative of the East Timorese people.

At least, open to question. At the time of the outbreak of the civil war, UDT and the other smaller embryonic political parties enjoyed considerable support until Fretilin, through superior weaponry, gained the upper hand.

COLLECTIVELY these allegations paint a very dark picture of Indonesia. I am surprised at the degree of acceptance some have received, largely through media coverage and through the repetition of uninvestigated comments by single-interest groups.

It is clear that the anti-Indonesian, pro-Fretilin lobby has woven a web of disinformation to discredit Indonesia, some of which has gained a measure of acceptance in the wider Australian community. Indonesia has hardly been given a "fair go", as we say.

Let me turn now to some of the realities in our relationship with Indonesia in 1992.

Understandably, many Australians tend to see Indonesia through the prism of our own experience, which is rooted in Western liberal democracy, relative affluence and a benign transition from colonial rule to independence in a relatively isolated, stable and prosperous continent. In such circumstances it is tempting for us to read self-righteous moral lectures, from our comfortable pulpit, to less favoured neighbours.

It is naive to think that if only Indonesians would embrace liberal democracy and be more like us we would all be better off. As Michael Duffy pointed out in a recent article in the *Independent Monthly*, as far as most Indonesians are concerned, the realistic alternative to the Soeharto Government at present is not Western democracy, but political anarchy and economic chaos of the sort experienced in the Sukarno years. This period left a profound impression on Indonesians which explains Indonesia's continuing preoccupation with national unity and stability.

We often overlook the benefits we have derived from a stable Indonesia under President Soeharto. Do we really want to court a situation of continuing tension with Indonesia which would damage our commercial interests and which could lead us to divert substantial resources to increasing our defence forces? A highly unstable, impoverished, expansionist Indonesia would be a national nightmare for Australia. Clearly Australia has a vital interest in Indonesia being a peaceful, prosperous and stable neighbour.

We need to acknowledge that political change is unlikely to be rapid in countries like Indonesia. We should remember that, while we may be able to set an example of a free and fair society — notwithstanding our treatment of our own indigenous people — we need to recognise the limits of our influence.

This is an edited text of an address by Richard Woolcott, former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and currently Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the ANU.